



SENATE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

EXHIBIT NO. 4

DATE 1.23.09

City Council SB166

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January 23, 2009

Senate Local Government Committee Comments on SB166

Chairman Esp and committee members:

I'm Dave Strohmaier, and I represent Ward 1 on the Missoula City Council. I'm here to speak in support of SB166. As some of you probably know, 2009 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the final trip of the North Coast Hiawatha through Montana. Since 1979, passenger rail service through southern Montana has amounted to periodic tourist train operations, but no reliable and affordable and consistent intercity passenger rail service. That is, no Amtrak.

And while I think it would be easy to adopt an attitude of retrenchment during these trying economic times, I think that now more than ever we need to address the long-term transportation needs of this state. As a plain citizen of Montana and this country, I'm very concerned that we pursue environmentally sustainable modes of transportation that lessen our impact on our Big Sky Country and the resources of the planet. And even though the price of fuel has plummeted in recent months, it won't stay that way forever, and it behooves us to look long and hard at the efficiencies that rail transportation has to offer—both for freight and passengers. For many seniors, passenger rail also provides a more convenient and hassle-free way to travel and visit loved ones. If there was ever a time when flying was actually glamorous, that day has surely slipped into the history books.

As an elected official from Missoula, I'm acutely aware of the difficulties faced by municipalities to fund transportation projects, be they local, regional, or national; be they sidewalks, streets, or rail. However, I think that Senator Lewis's bill, like SB9, which was introduced by Ron Erickson, provides one more tool for local governments to initiate passenger rail projects.

Last fall, the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 was signed into law. Among other things, such as providing matching grants to states for expanding intercity passenger rail lines, this legislation directs Amtrak to study the feasibility of reestablishing a southern route through Montana. The Montana Department of Transportation is also currently examining the feasibility of a southern route. Both of these studies should be completed this year. Once the studies are completed, my hope is that we'll have a suite of tools available to enhance and expand passenger rail service within Montana, and the political will to make it a reality. This must be a truly collaborative effort between local, state, and federal levels of government. It won't be easy, but I think it is good work—necessary work—to planning for the future transportation needs of our state.

Regional intercity and interstate passenger rail lines are only one piece of the overall passenger rail equation. Over the past year, the City of Missoula has been in the process of developing a master plan for

our downtown. As part of that planning exercise, one concept that we're exploring is to establish a streetcar system in our downtown core that might eventually tie together our central business district with The University of Montana and our airport. This, too, is passenger rail service. But as with any other transportation infrastructure, in order to make it a reality we need the fiscal tools that will allow our municipality to shape its own destiny.

Again, I think that SB166 is one tool that will help communities across Montana realize an ambitious but achievable vision of renewed passenger rail service. Now is the time for bold action and I think this bill before you today can help realize that future.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dave Strohmaier". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dave Strohmaier
Missoula City Council, Ward 1